

11 Tips for Professional Behavior in the Classroom

Contributed by Marian L. Swindell, Ph.D., MSW

In my six years as a social work professor, I have seen a drastic change in the behavior of social work students in social work courses. After reading the syllabus aloud to my students, many of them still come to class unprepared, apathetic, disrespectful, and unmotivated. When I was a graduate student in social work at the University of Alabama, I read my textbook chapters, often several times, before I went to class. I outlined my chapters, underlined key definitions, and came to class prepared with questions about the text I did not understand. I was never the top student in my class. I never was the teacher's pet. I knew I needed to master the material, because once I graduated, it would just be me and the client...and all the knowledge I had gleaned from my studies. I realized the importance of my job, and I also realized that if I didn't do my job correctly, then I would suffer the reputation of being a bad social worker. On top of that, I would bring shame to my profession. {mosgoogle right}

When students do not participate in classroom discussions, plagiarize on papers, refuse to read the assigned chapters before class, or do not stay awake in class, they are modeling their future behavior as professional social workers for me. Little do they realize that at the end of their first semester, many of them will be seated before me applying for admittance into our social work program. During this interview process, they are alive, bright-eyed, happy, and awake. After the interviews and their part, rehearsed answers about the strength-based profession and application of theory, I then share their classroom behavior with the other interviewers. The results are usually not beneficial to the students. They are placed on academic probation or are denied admittance into our program. Most of them explain the probation or denial into the program by saying I am too hard an instructor or that I expect too much from my students. They find a way to blame it on anyone but themselves. Students also seem to be unaware that the instructors in our department share with each other how students are progressing in our courses.

Students often count on professors to curve grades at the end of the semester, or give extra credit, or some other gimmick to help them pass through the program. So curving grades and giving extra credit really just assists the student in graduating from the program, but not passing licensure. Although these solutions do bandage the immediate problem, students often forget they still have to pass the licensure exam and ask professors for letters of reference. They seem to forget that we are aware of the students who intentionally performed poorly in their classes. They seem to forget that we can pull out our grade books from five years ago and see how many classes they skipped, how many assignments they missed, and how many tests they failed because they didn't even show up.

I have included in this article a few suggestions for social work students to assist them in acting professionally in the classroom:

- Read through your syllabus several times so you know what to expect in the course.
- Read each chapter before going to class. If you can only read it once, that will help you so much during class to be able to participate in class discussions and ask questions. Instructors really enjoy the classroom experience a lot more when students speak up. And believe me, we know which students contribute and which students do not.
- When you do speak up in class, think about what you are going to say before you say it. Don't just blurt out random thoughts and spend five minutes explaining your opinion on a matter. Get right to the point and then move on. Students who ramble on and on incessantly in class frustrate both their classmates and their instructors.
- Type all your assignments! If you are in community college or higher, turning in handwritten documents indicates laziness and unprofessionalism.
- Read through all term paper assignments thoroughly to make sure you know exactly what is expected. Many times the syllabus or the assignment will spell out exactly what the instructor is looking for in your paper.
- Stay awake during class. If you have a medical condition that makes you drowsy, explain this to the instructor before class.
- Spit out gum before class and turn off cell phones (or at least place them on vibrate).
- Proofread your papers before turning them in.
- Do not close your notebooks and get ready to go UNTIL the instructor dismisses class. Doing so sooner is extremely rude and unprofessional.
- Show up for class either before class starts or on time. Walking into class late is extremely rude and unprofessional.
- Don't plagiarize on papers or exams! You can be expelled for such behavior, and the infraction will go on your permanent academic record. This means that when you apply for jobs and they request an official transcript, your potential employer will know you cheated in college and will more than likely not hire you...can you really blame them, though?

My professional advice to students is given at the beginning of every semester. I direct them to read through the syllabus, read each chapter assigned and do a chapter outline, come to class prepared to discuss every issue touched on in the text, and to open their minds to active learning. I explain that it is unethical of me to "pass the buck" and let them pass my class if they have not mastered the material. Most students do not like this. They all want A's in the course because they have made A's on papers and gotten A's in all their classes in the community college thus far. I explain to students that being a full-time student in college should be treated like being a full-time employee. They need to devote at least 40 hours per week on their school work. Yes, that is possible if they

are working and have families. I said it was possible, not easy.

The profession of social work desperately needs ethical, hard-working graduates. What we don't need are employees who want an easy job, pick up their paycheck, and go home. I see this attitude in students who just want to come to class, not study, take exams, and get A's. I explain that my courses don't work that way. Surprisingly, at the end of every semester, students come to my office and tell me that my class was the hardest one they have ever taken but they learned more than they have learned in any other class. They say I am hard, fair, and am a credit to my profession. That makes my job worthwhile. What would make my job unbelievably wonderful would be if all social work students wanted to really make a change in the lives of the people they will work with, to make a change on a global scale, to be passionate about their career choice, and dedicate their passion to the profession.

In conclusion, I hope that all the current social work students who read this will be able to better understand what social work professors and instructors are hoping to instill in our students. But above all, I hope all students reading this article will seriously consider stepping up their performance in the classroom, in field placement, and effecting change in the classroom by inspiring and motivating their classmates.

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